GOD'S GREAT "YES"
II Corinthians 1:15-22
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In the 2nd week in Feb. the entire Am. nation was moved by the return of our P.O.W.s. Sandra's letter at the time indicated that you were watching it too — as men got off planes at Clarke Air Base in Phil.pines

~~I was moved deeply by what happened last week in Hanoi and Clarke Air Force Base in the Philippines; what~~ Time Magazine called "A celebration of Men Redeemed." And that is exactly what it was. As we watched it on television we wanted to shout and clap and sing the "Star Spangled Banner", or perhaps weep the tears of profound joy. For redemption is a beautiful thing indeed. They had known the power and reality of death. They had experienced what it means to have life say "no": to live without hope - without a future - and with the possibilities severely restrained. But now, suddenly, dramatically, life had said "Yes". They were free and alive.

Several phenomena are common to men in ~~prison~~ captivity. Life is incredibly boring and time is no longer precious - or even very important. A clinical psychologist for the V.A. put it in these words: "no one who has not been totally at the mercy of other human beings can understand it. It brings a feeling of total helplessness and then a fantastic apathy."

"Filled with guilt, concerned only with physical survival, the prisoner often becomes obsessed with trivial rituals and trivial goals. . .it is routine to spend hours folding a blanket, because it is one of the few things a ~~guy~~ man can do from which he can get a feeling of effectiveness if he does it well." A psychiatrist explains that, "Many prisoners learn to cope with their situation by setting up low-key reactions in themselves - a kind of little death to save themselves from a bigger death." (Time, 2/19/73, P. 18)

Their plight was best summarized in the gray, grim photographs we occasionally saw: one I shall never forget, two men in those colorless pajamas feeding pigeons, and the expression on their faces displayed a kind of blank concentration, and a total absence of joy.

And then suddenly one day ~~this Spr. last week~~ in February they were free: life suddenly said "Yes" to them - they could say "Yes" to life, "Yes" to the future, "Yes" to the people they had learned to live without. ~~I expect~~ Their testimony was that they felt more alive than they ever have before; almost as if they have been resurrected from a kind of slow, gray death on earth. ~~I expect~~ All their senses ~~are~~ were alert and ~~that~~ their wives and children and parents looked more beautiful to them than they ever did in the past: ~~I expect~~ the noises of an American city sounded like a symphony to them: ~~that~~ the land looked good - ~~that~~ food tasted better than they ever

remembered it tasting. I was delighted to read that the Air Force had a supply of bland foods on hand so they wouldn't have to plunge right into standard American fare. But nobody wanted it: it was all steak and eggs and ice cream. I was also delighted to read that these men who had spent years of drab, dull introspection - and who were expected to need some time to adjust to freedom, tried to commandeer a bus on their second night to get to the officers' club.

Suddenly life said "Yes" to them: suddenly they were free to say "Yes" to life: suddenly dead men started to live again: it was a "celebration of redemption" and a thing of beauty to behold. And I am certain those brave and happy men would not mind if I suggested that their experience is a striking analogy to what happens to men when they sense what God has done in Jesus Christ. For just as life said "yes" to the prisoners of War last ~~week~~ Feb. and just as they are beautifully and dramatically free to say "Yes" to life, so Jesus Christ is God's way of saying "Yes" to us, and our freedom to say "Yes" to our lives.

That is how St.Paul had it. In his second Letter to the early Christian Church at Corinth Paul is defending himself from the charge that he had been fickle and dishonest because of a change in his travel plans. And in the process of his defense, he gets into some heavy and significant theology. The J.B. Phillips translation articulates it most clearly: "Jesus Christ, the Son of God...he is the divine 'Yes'. Every promise of God finds its affirmative in him, and through him can be said the final Amen, to the glory of God. We owe our position in Christ to this God of positive promise."

The God of the Old Testament, the God of Israel , was a God of promise. In that portion of Isaiah which we read this morning the prophet says: "Behold, I am doing a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?.. I am He who blots out your transgressions... and I will not remember your sins." In the Psalter we read: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil. For thou art with me". And ~~"Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there."~~ And Hosea: "How can I give you up, O Ephriam! How can I hand you over, O Israel, My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephriam"

Well, all of that, Paul ascerted, was confirmed by God in Jesus Christ. Christ is

God's "yes" to all the promise of his people down through the centuries. And because of God's "yes", man can say "yes" to his own life. Paul saw human existance in terms of two rather clear categories: the category of sin and death, and the category of Christ and life. All men are caught by death, the ultimate "no" to human life. All men are ensnared in their own sin which also negates life. But in Chirst, Paul taught, men are literally transferred from one realm to the other. In Christ men are free from death, and alive - really alive. Before life said "no", and men lived an existence that says "no". But after Christ - or after a man hears the Good News - life comes as a great "Yes". Basic to it all is that the life of a Christian, the life of salvation is new and full and open and exciting: a "yes" in the face of all the world's "no's".

And yet, isn't it strange and vexing the way the Gospel - God's Great Yes - keeps coming across somehow as a "NO". God's "no" to man's sin, which is legitimate enough, only we've never been able to let it go at that. Instead it becomes God's "no" to man, which becomes man's "no" to himself, which becomes a "no" to the world and other people. And is it any wonder that though we confess our sins over and over again with monotonous' regularity we never really feel forgiven, accepted and loved by God? "Repent and be saved," the Bible teaches, and what that means - when you begin with a divine "no" instead of a "yes" is that we must turn away - away from self away from the world which is full of sin and temptation - and ultimately, tragically - away from people who happen not to agree with us. And repentance and salvation come off sounding like a kind of spiritual prison instead of a beautiful duet on the word "yes" sung by God and ourselves.

In an article on repentance Wes Seeliger, and Episcopalian observes: "Repentance means 'turning'. Turning from something to something else. We are all moralistic. So we think of repentance as giving up this or that little vice and putting more umph into our efforts to be good.

"But the 'turning' demanded by our faith is more profound. It's an inside-out change. Repentance means turning away from a dead, cramped defensive stance toward life. It means giving up our cherished excuses for not being fully alive. It means knocking down the walls that keep other people at arm's length. It means going into all situations with eyes, heart and head wide open.

"Repentance means turning to a new world. New, not because it wasn't there before, but new because you are seeing it for the first time. Repentance means pushing yourself beyond the borders of a safe, comfortable life. It means becoming fully alive in Christ... (Alive Now, Winter 72, P. 55)

The Church, however, has for too long been promoting a neurotic and sick theology: God saying "no" to man; man feeling guilty and saying "no" to himself - "no" to the world. And it is a simple truism that people who don't like themselves and distrust the world are going to be particularly unhappy people. They may spend an inordinate amount of energy trying to pretend that they're happy because the Bible says that's the way it ought to be. But scratch the surface and you'll find a neurotic guilt that feeds on itself: a guilt that can not be alleviated: and a life that has to be shackled, restrained, confined, because behind it all is a frowning, wrathful God who says "no" to his people.

In Jesus Christ God has said "Yes". We know, from our own parenting, that a child's basic attitude toward life begins to take shape with the first human contact. And it's going to be either positive or negative, loving or hating, trusting or mistrusting, embracing or pushing, open or closed, Yes or No, depending on the way parents and other significant adults deal with the child. A child who is not comforted and caressed, who is handled brusquely, who is left alone to cry instead of being fed and changed and rocked learns very quickly that someone out there is saying "no", that the world is a suspicious and treacherous place. Battered children are so full of self hatred and negative feelings that they become suspicious, untrusting, unloving adults in serious emotional trouble. We know that a child learns to say Yes to himself and to life and to the whole world out there - because his parents say Yes to him. And at the very heart of the Gospel, and the very essence of the Christian idea of salvation, is a father God who has said an eloquent and loving "yes" to us.

So, I would suggest, to be a Christian, to stand in the Good News, is to say Yes to oneself first - then yes to other people - and finally yes to the world.

Saying yes to self is first and most important. I can say yes to myself - who I am - physically - intellectually - emotionally - because my parents said Yes to me. On a deeper level I can say "yes" to self because God has said "yes" to me in Jesus Christ.

And yet we live in a cultural climate that frequently says "no" to us as persons, and

which is not only okay but becomes more public

there is no better example than the changing public view of human sexuality. Some would have us believe that we have finally arrived: that victorian prudishness has been put to rest and that we are now free to enjoy the lusty sexuality God has given us. And the result is a veritable tidal wave of pornography in books, motion pictures and magazines. The sexuality now being celebrated under the guise of freedom is not saying "yes" to the human body. For in fact it is a pale shadow of true eros. With few exceptions cinema sex, playboy sex is impersonal, phony, oppressive, ~~[illegible]~~ and ultimately pretty boring. It can be watched and read without personal involvement, without passion and celebration and joy. We have, Rollo May ascerts (~~Love and Will~~) in our time killed Eros - the Greek God of love, the life force - and replaced it with something sleazy called "eroticism" which is simply an obsession with physiological mechanics. And which is a denial - a "no" - to the deepest human need to love and to be loved.

God's "yes" means we may say "yes" to ourselves: we may accept ourselves as lovable creatures of dignity and worth; we may enjoy being who we are without shame and without false modesty. And because we have said "yes" to self we can begin to say "yes" to others. To see the people with whom we have contact as individuals to whom God has also said "yes", creatures of worth whose need to be loved and cared for and listened to is every bit as real as our own. Not opponents to be bested, not competitors in the game of life but beautiful, unique creations of God - ~~who just may say "yes" to us - if we are free to affirm them.~~

And finally "yes" to the world. "Yes" to the world God loved enough to send his Son into. Yes to all the beauty out there hidden in the commonplace; yes to all the dirt and trouble and strife: "Yes" because God has said "Yes". A young people's prayer of thanksgiving says it all: - some of this you will have to translate - for it is a peculiarly American young person's prayer ....

"O give thanks to the Lord for he is good.
We thank thee for hamburgers with onions,
for french fries and cokes.
For thick, juicy steaks, for ice cold milk,
For salted cashew nuts, for hot, buttered rolls,
For delicious apples, and milk cheddar cheese.

O give thanks to the Lord for he is good.

We thank thee for blue jeans, tennis shoes

and big sloppy sweat shirts.

For warm, wooly knee-socks and soft, roomy loafers.

For summer and its sun, its burning sand and sea

For the crunching of autum leaves underfoot,

For rainy days - for Christmas trees.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good." (Tune In, Pilgrim Press, P. 12)

Because God has said "Yes" we may say "yes" to the world. It is not, contrary to popular belief, a terrible, treacherous place. Our repentance is not, contrary to popular but neurotic theology, a matter of turning away from it. "Worldly" is not, contrary to the going definition, a bad word but a good one. Because God has said "yes" to the world we can embrace and love it and live in with a passionate and undying commitment.

The late Dag Hammarskjold recorded his own spiritual pilgrimage in a book entitled "Markings." On April 7, 1953 he wrote

"To be free, to be able to stand up and leave everything behind - without looking back to say Yes - " (P. 91)

And then later that same day:

"To say yes to life is at one and the same time to say Yes to oneself.

And then on Whitsunday, 1961

"I don't know who - or what put the question. I don't even know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to someone or something - and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.." (P.205)

To be a Christian is to respond to God's yes by saying "yes" to ourselves, to others, and to the world. It is to do so in the face of the ultimate "no" - the reality of death - our own death. Just as the Prisoners of War are today more alive than they ever were before precisely because they had lived through the reality of death, so you and I may be morealive because Jesus Christ has experienced death for us - the same death as our own. To know that he, Jesus Christ, is God's love, God's yes, is to be free to live and love and

laugh - to shout a "yes" of our own.

As he was recuperating from a severe heart attack the noted psychiatrist Abraham Maslow wrote a letter to a friend, part of which expresses the beauty and newness of living in God's yes - and answering it affirmatively.

"The confrontation with death - and the reprieve from it - makes everything look so precious, so sacred, so beautiful that I feel more strongly than ever the impulse to love it, to embrace it, and to let myself be overwhelmed by it. My river has never looked so beautiful. Death, and it's ever-present possibility makes love, passionate love, more possible. I wonder if we could love passionately, if ecstacy would be possible at all if we knew we'd never die." (~~Love and Will, R. May P. 97~~)

-My river never looked so beautiful -. Nor has the world, Dr. Maslow, nor other people, nor ourselves. For God has said "Yes". AMEN

Father, help us to cut through all the contrary messages, however well-meant, and to hear the "Yes" which you have spoken. We are grateful, father, that you have affirmed us: help us now to live and love and laugh - in Jesus Christ - your "Yes" - our Lord. AMEN